

# Healing Hands:

## Dr. Laura Louie Brings Help and Hope to HIV/AIDS Patients in Thailand...and Beyond

**“With healing, touch is so important,”** Dr. Laura Louie says. She also credits the healing touch of acupuncture and massage with helping to eliminate some of the stigma of HIV/AIDS for Thai patients and their families.



PHOTOS BY HARRY BOHM



Dr. Laura Louie, center, is grateful to the first two Thai nurses who volunteered to receive acupuncture training at the clinic. Duangdean Ruensa, at left, and Unchalee Pultajuk, right, were “very brave” to spend a year learning acupuncture on their own time in addition to demanding full-time jobs as RNs. “It was not an easy process,” Dr. Louie says, “and the training was in English, which neither spoke very well at the time.”

So how does a nice well-to-do Chinese-Russian girl from Canada end up teaching acupuncture in an HIV clinic in Thailand?!

“It’s been a very long journey!” Dr. Laura Louie laughs.

A Bastyr-trained naturopathic physician in private practice in Vancouver, B.C., Dr. Louie’s interest in healing the world began when she was a small child accompanying her parents on overseas visits.

“International travel makes you realize how very lucky you are,” she remembers. “As a child, it affected me profoundly to see other children who didn’t have

enough food or clothing.”

Dr. Louie was raised in a prominent Canadian family. Her grandfather founded the H.Y. Louie Company and his sons brought IGA supermarkets to Vancouver in 1955. The family later acquired London Drugs and continues to run these businesses today. Yet in spite of their own lifestyle, young Laura’s mother always reminded her of those living in poverty in other countries. As a result, she grew up believing that she was “truly blessed to live in Canada and to have been born into” such circumstances.

Many who are born into affluence simply use their checkbooks to help

make the world a better place. But Laura Louie is not one who could ever be content with armchair philanthropy. She started the Laura Louie Hope Foundation in 2006 to focus her extraordinary energy and resources on creating sustainable health care programs for impoverished people living with HIV/AIDS in developing countries. Dr. Louie uses acupuncture, massage, nutritional counseling, educational programs and self-sustaining garden projects to improve the quality of life for some of the world’s most vulnerable citizens.

In 2004, she set up a free acupuncture clinic at the Mae On Hospital in Chiang

“Keeping your body healthy is an expression of gratitude to the whole cosmos - the trees, the clouds, everything.” – Thich Nhat Hanh

Mai, Thailand, to help ease the suffering of HIV/AIDS patients in these very hands-on ways. More than 580,000 Thai adults and children are estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS and over 21,000 deaths have been recorded.

“When we talk about HIV/AIDS, we hear that the most optimum treatment is ARV (anti-retroviral therapy), an intervention that is proven to extend the lives of people living with the disease,” Louie says. While ARV is available in Thailand, it is expensive and has “extreme side effects, including pain, peripheral neuropathy, diarrhea and insomnia.”

patient told her. “Now I have something to lean on...”

### Teaching the Thai to “Climb Mountains”

In less than 12 months, Dr. Louie had not only established the clinic but was well on the way to achieving her goal of training local medical staff so that the program could become self-sustaining.

“So often we hear about well-intentioned programs that local people don’t know how to continue once the creators have left,” Louie says, voicing

The acupuncture clinic is now part of the Mae On Hospital, a rural community hospital that serves 20,000 Thai people. Located 20 miles east of Chiang Mai, it has only 18 in-patient beds.



“Fortunately, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has a long history of enhancing the immune function,” she explains. “Acupuncture, one of the modalities of TCM, allows for symptom treatment without adding extra medications and also has the potential to improve quality of life.”

Many of the Mae On patients have reported improved appetites, better sleep, less stress, and more energy, even though they were not treated directly for these conditions.

“Acupuncture increases my hopes and aspirations and strengthens me,” one

her belief that it does little good to “carry someone up the hill when we can teach them to climb the mountain themselves.”

She credits Thai nurse Unchalee Pultajuk with being instrumental in both starting and sustaining the Mae On Clinic.

“Unchalee took my model, translated it into Thai and created a clinic atmosphere that is lovely, safe and warm,” Louie recalls proudly. “It’s critically important to have someone like her who shares this passion and is committed to carrying it forward.”

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**“We always hear about the big relief organizations, such as Save the Children. But small grassroots efforts can also have a huge impact. Smaller programs are staffed by volunteers and everything comes from the heart. All the funds go to those who need them most... virtually nothing is spent on**

**administration.**

**This makes a huge difference in small communities and they are so appreciative.**

**There is a huge void to fill in the humanitarian**

**medical community that we haven’t begun to touch. I always encourage younger and retired doctors to come and help volunteer in overseas efforts.”**

— DR. LAURA LOUIE

◆◆◆ **“Our bodies are our gardens - our wills are our gardeners.” –William Shakespeare**



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## Education and Prevention are Key Components of Sustainability

While the acupuncture and other treatments performed at the clinic greatly improve physical symptoms, there is also an equally important quality-of-life benefit for patients and their families.

“We intentionally set up the clinic in a way that would create a social hub for the patients,” Louie says. “Here they can talk freely, express emotions and know that they won’t be judged. This contributes greatly to their healing process.”

Dr. Louie believes that the lack of HIV education in indigenous languages, along with the ongoing personal and social damage caused by HIV stigma and gender

to succeed. ARVs do not work without adequate food; pills alone are not enough. Proper nutrition is not seen as a critical factor in HIV and it should be.”

## Coming Home to Natural Medicine

As a college student, it would have been difficult for Laura Louie to imagine the impact her vision would eventually have on impoverished people throughout the world. She studied zoology and initially worked as a geologist, as she found the volatility of rugged outdoor conditions in field camps invigorating. Louie could not have known then how well those experiences would serve her in rural Thailand and other remote regions

wanted to know that YOU cared about them in the same way.”

Among those who influenced her most throughout her journey were her mother, who she credits with expanding her horizons and crystallizing her desire to work with underprivileged people, and some of her professors at Bastyr University.

As one of the first students in Bastyr Center’s Immune Wellness Clinic for HIV/AIDS patients, Louie remembers Drs. Jane Guiltinan and Leanna Standish for their “amazing way of communicating with us and the patients.” She believes that their influence shaped the supportive way she now works with her own patients, both in Canada and across the world.

“Prior to having acupuncture I was aware of the symptoms and this would cause me some stress. But now that these symptoms have eased, almost gone, I don’t think about this anymore and feel emotionally and spiritually better.”

— A PATIENT AT THE MAE ON CLINIC



Dr. Louie, left, and Nurse Ruensa, right, perform acupuncture on HIV patients at the clinic.

inequality are significant underlying issues that must be addressed before AIDS can ever be eradicated. Grassroots programs like those at the Mae On Clinic are essential, effective steps on the road to an AIDS-free planet.

Still, for every person with access to treatment, four new people are infected with HIV. Therefore, “treatment efforts without a prevention component are simply not sustainable.”

“Treatment needs to include therapies that maintain health and improve quality of life while patients wait for ARV,” Louie says. “In addition, efforts to treat AIDS without proper nutrition are unlikely

of the world many years later.

When she began to consider a career in medicine, she looked at traditional options and also at becoming a chiropractor. Searching for a holistic approach, she applied to traditional medical schools, chiropractic colleges and—finally—Bastyr University. The interview process convinced her that she had found her true “home.”

“They asked all the right questions,” Louie recalls, noting the dramatic difference between conventional medical school interviews and the one she experienced at Bastyr. “They not only cared deeply about their patients but they

## What’s the Next Stop on Dr. Louie’s Incredible Journey?

After four successful years spent creating and operating the Mae On acupuncture program, Dr. Louie is now in the process of establishing a more extensive medical and educational program in Darjeeling, India. She plans to continue the practice of deliberately putting herself out of a job in each location so that she can redirect her formidable talents to creating similar programs in other developing countries. Louie continues to visit the Mae On Clinic three times each year to provide

“Life is no brief candle to me. It is sort of a splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn

clinical supervision and continuing education. She also purchases all the supplies while there and provides financial support through the Laura Louie Hope Foundation.

Dr. Louie is undaunted by the considerable challenges of Darjeeling, which she calls “a forgotten part of India.” Most of the citizens are refugees or migrant workers from Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and the impoverished province of Bihar. The program will be similar to Mae On but expanded, with a more regional focus. It will also include an enhanced educational component, including workshops to help people better understand the disease and its stigma, along with gender equality issues.

“There has only been an HIV program

wasted” from AIDS when he came to the Mae On Clinic that he looked no older than a teenager. He had lost over 30 pounds in two months and was confined to a wheelchair. While he had access to ARV therapy, the side effects had left him weak and with such severe peripheral neuropathy that he was unable to stand, walk or perform the simplest task without assistance.

He began receiving acupuncture and other treatments at the clinic and nine months later, Dr. Louie received a photograph of him from one of the clinic volunteers. He was not only out of the wheelchair but had returned to his job as a tailor. The photograph showed a revitalized man smiling broadly next to an entire rack of clothing he had made.



At left, Dr. Louie demonstrates a technique for Duangdean. The photo of Unchalee successfully treating a patient on the right was taken recently, four years after she first learned acupuncture from Dr. Louie. The clinic is now self-sustaining, as Dr. Louie envisioned it from the outset.



there for two years, which is shocking,” she says, “and the stigma and gender inequality are enormous. Women aren’t getting tested knowing that they and their families will be discriminated against if they’re (HIV) positive.”

## Staying the Course

How does this extraordinary woman stay focused and motivated when constantly assaulted by the disease’s daunting numbers and overwhelming odds, along with constant funding and staffing challenges?

Dr. Louie responds by telling of a man in his 30s who was so “thin and

“Working directly with patients is without a doubt the most fulfilling aspect of this work for me,” Louie says. “This man had gotten his life back. His health had improved and he was able to once again support his family, which in turn decreased his emotional and financial stress.”

In other words, there had been dramatic upturns in body, mind and spirit. And that, after all, is what natural medicine is all about.

For further information about Dr. Louie’s work, visit [www.lauralouiehopefoundation.org](http://www.lauralouiehopefoundation.org).

Dr. Laura Louie stands five feet 10 inches tall. And while she spent many years wishing to be shorter, her stature has proven to be a distinct advantage in India and Thailand. In cultures where gender inequality remains strong, her height has given her a presence that commands respect.

In spite of her stature—literally and figuratively—Dr. Louie Louie remains delightfully down to earth and unaffected by the magnitude of her

transformative, life-altering work. She is quick to deflect the credit in her gentle, unassuming way, praising the volunteers and collaborators who help her. Yet there can be no question that it is only through

her tireless efforts, incredible compassion and commitment to healing that there is now a lot less suffering in “forgotten” parts of our planet. It is hard to imagine any more important work.

Hope is not simply a word contained in the name of Dr. Laura Louie’s Foundation. It’s what she does.

